

Identity Formation

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National identity was critical to the rise of the modern nation-state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nation-building, and the attempts by government leaders to create strong loyalties to the nation, are historically linked with the social and economic transformations produced by industrialization. In Japan, this process began in 1868, when the Tokugawa shogunate, which had ruled the country since 1600, gave way to a new government which claimed to restore the emperor to rule. In reality, a small group of oligarchs, ruling in the emperor's name, carried out a massive modernization program designed to strengthen the country and enable it to meet the Western challenges to Japanese sovereignty. The new ideology that was created to legitimate the Meiji reforms drew on ideas of the divine origins of Japan and the divinity of its emperors that were found in Japan's oldest historical records.

Divine Origins

Most educated Japanese in the Tokugawa period (1600-1868) accepted as historical fact the version of Japanese history presented in their earliest histories. According to the Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters) and the Nihon shoki (History of Japan), written in the early eighth century, the islands and the people of Japan were created by deities. The most important of these deities was the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. Amaterasu sent her grandchild down to the Central Land of Reed Plains (Japan), and his descendant, Jimmu, eventually unified the contending tribes and became Japan's first emperor (tennō), in 660 B.C. From Jimmu Tennō to the current emperor there has been a continuous, unbroken line of descent.

Theories of divine origins were not as important in the Tokugawa period as they were to become in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To begin with, the emperor had since 1185 been divested of actual administrative power. Japan was actually governed by a succession of shogunal houses. It was curious that the divine origins of Japan and of the imperial line should in the seventeenth century become the focus of a major school of scholarship led by a member of the Tokugawa lineage. While the Tokugawa shoguns patronized Confucianism, the daimyō of the Mito domain founded a scholarly enterprise that focused on emperor-centered history. The Mito school, as it is called, began with Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628-1700), who wrote Dai nihon shi (History of Great Japan). Mitsukuni readily accepted Jimmu as the founder of the imperial house and carefully traced an orthodox line of imperial succession. Mitsukuni's history repeated accounts of Japan's divine origins. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Mito

school's emphasis on the centrality of a divine emperor to the Japanese polity helped erode the legitimacy of shogunal rule.

The divine origins of Japan and of the imperial house were challenged by other Tokugawa historians. But Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and other proponents of the National Learning school (Kokugaku) sternly defended the Kojiki and Nihon shoki versions of Japanese origins as historical truth, especially against Confucian challengers. Motoori is best known for his successful efforts to place the Kojiki at the center of the Shinto revival of the eighteenth century. He and the other members of the National Learning school attacked Confucianism as a foreign import, and they praised Japan's uniqueness as embodied in its imperial line.

National History

The Mito school and the National Learning school influenced the thinking of the samurai from three outlying domains who seized power in the emperor's name in 1867. "National history" (kokushi) was born during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Japan was engaged in transforming itself into a modern nation-state. History writing was central to the creation of the emperor-centered ideology (tennōsei) that legitimated the modernization reforms and mobilized popular support for the creation of a Japanese empire. This ideology was discredited by Japan's defeat during the second world war, but several key themes that were developed in the first half of the twentieth century lingered in Japanese ideas about their own identity.

The creation of tennōsei ideology took place over several decades. Although the Meiji government put the imperial institution and the Meiji emperor himself at the center of its efforts to create a unified nation from 1868 onward, tennōsei is the term used to describe the political values that were put in place in the 1890s. The Meiji Constitution, which vested sovereignty in the emperor and not in the people, institutionalized the image of the emperor as a transcendental figure who was above politics yet commanded the loyalty of all Japanese. Japanese children were taught that Japan was created by the gods and that the emperor was the descendant of the Sun Goddess. His existence, and the continuity of the imperial line, affirmed heaven's favor and Japan's uniqueness in the world. The Imperial Rescript on Education, issued in 1890, presented the concept of Japan as a family state (kazoku kokka), with the emperor as the father of the nation. As his children, Japanese citizens were obliged to do whatever was needed to "guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne."

By the early twentieth century, the emperor-centered ideology was featured in the standardized textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education that were used in classrooms throughout Japan. The government created an integrated system of State

Shinto which reinforced tennōsei. The government refurbished [Ise, the shrine dedicated to](#) Amaterasu, and created new national shrines such as the one marking the spot where the first emperor, Jimmu, was said to have held his ascension ceremony. The date in 660 B.C. when Emperor Jimmu mounted the throne was declared a national holiday, Kigensetsu.

The emperor-centered ideology that sustained the Japanese until 1945 did not go unchallenged. Meiji leaders appointed foreign scholars to teach at the newly established Tokyo Imperial University (the forerunner of today's Tokyo University); Japanese went abroad to study and established new disciplines in Japan upon their return.

Through Ludwig Riess, who taught history at Tokyo Imperial University from 1887 to 1902, Leopold von Ranke's ideas on the scientific method of historical research were transmitted to a generation of Japanese scholars. Archaeology was also introduced into Japan, and artifacts that were later discovered also directly challenged the accepted version of Japan's origins (see "Ethnic Diversity and the Origins of the Japanese" and "Buddhism and Shinto"). Historians who attempted to use new methodology to question state orthodoxy were quickly suppressed.

Not only was history central to the political ideology of the Meiji state, many prominent historians were actually employed by the government. The Meiji government had in 1869 appointed official historians to write a comprehensive Japanese history, and in 1888, historians on the Bureau of Historiography (Shūshikan) were appointed as professors at Tokyo Imperial University. Since the university was a state institution, its faculty were (and still are) civil servants, under public scrutiny and subject to discipline from government officials and politicians.

Kume Kunitake was a respected specialist in ancient history who served on the Bureau of Historiography. When he published an article in 1891 stating that Shinto was by Western standards little more than a primitive religion, several hundred articles in newspapers and journals attacked Kume for religious blasphemy and pressed for his removal from the faculty at Tokyo Imperial University. Kume was forced to publish a retraction of his opinions and ordered to resign his university post. Kume's downfall illustrated the personal consequences of airing contentious views.

The Kume case was followed by another that pressured historians to put official policy above their own research and scholarship. In 1911, a second public furor erupted when the history section of the elementary school textbook was found to contradict the government's official policy concerning the legitimate line of imperial succession. Historians were accustomed to calling the fourteenth century period of divided imperial courts the "Northern and Southern Courts" (Nanboku chō) era, but the Meiji Restoration modeled itself on the southern court and had enshrined its loyal officials. The textbook

deviated from the government's policy by treating both courts equally. The discussion in the media led to questions in the Diet and almost toppled the cabinet, which insisted that the textbooks be revised in accordance with government policy. During the debates, critics attacked professional historians for not understanding the tremendous damage they inflicted on young minds by not adhering firmly to the official policy. Scholarship which contradicted the tenets of the emperor ideology could not occupy public space. Thereafter, leading historians tended to remain silent if they disagreed with official orthodoxy. From 1931, offensive statements were removed from books and censorship increased.

Postwar National and Cultural Identity

Japan's defeat in World War II stunned many Japanese. The American Occupation (1945-1952) removed all references to the pre-war ideology from Japanese textbooks and forced the emperor to publicly renounce claims to divinity. A new constitution was adopted which vested sovereignty in the people and declared that the emperor was a "symbol of the state." Despite numerous attempts by conservative politicians to revise this clause after the signing of the Peace Treaty in 1951, it remains the constitutional definition of the emperor's role in Japan.

During the Occupation period, the prewar emperor-centered ideology was discredited and disappeared from view. With it went many of the national symbols that had been invented during the Meiji period such as the flag and national anthem. With the active participation of the staff of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), the image of the Shōwa emperor, Hirohito, was democratized. Both the Imperial Household Agency and SCAP shielded the emperor from accusations of war guilt and portrayed him as someone who had been powerless to stop the militarists.

As the Japanese economy grew to unprecedented levels from the 1960s onward, many Japanese began to shift their attention from rebuilding to issues of national identity. Ultranationalist attempts to reinstate the prewar ideology met with fierce resistance. The old prewar flag and national anthem were not restored until 1999; attempts to resuscitate the prewar imperial house were opposed in the National Diet and by segments of the Japanese public. *Nihonjinron* (Discourse on Japaneseness) eschewed these prewar symbols of Japanese identity but emphasized themes that were present not only in the first half of the twentieth century but earlier.

The concept of a unique Japanese culture owes much to the pioneering ethnographer Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962), who in the 1930s and 1940s attempted to integrate his fieldwork observations of Japanese localities into a unified understanding of Japanese culture. The concept of a single "national character" underlying local diversity was also

evident in the writing of intellectuals like the philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), who sought to balance the influx of Western thought and values into Japan by identifying Japanese alternatives. Nishida argued that there was a distinctive Japanese consciousness which arose out of the relationship between Japanese and their land, mediated through the transcendent figure of the emperor. Unlike later Nihonjinron advocates, however, Nishida held a universalistic vision: Japanese consciousness was transferable to non-Japanese and should be communicated to the world community.

The influence of Yanagita and Nishida is evident in the Nihonjinron writings of the 1970s and 1980s. The Japanese people were assumed to be a homogenous group (see "Multiethnic Japan") that had derived much of its cultural character from wet-rice agriculture, which required cooperation in irrigation, encouraged collective efforts, and therefore led to a group orientation. Japanese culture was by definition unlike any other. Evidence for this proposition could be found in the Japanese language, which some claimed to be unique among world's languages. Nihonjinron proponents argued that the unspoken rules of social intercourse among Japanese had many subtleties that outsiders could never hope to comprehend. This unique blend of homogeneous ethnicity and shared values was ostensibly the prime reason for Japan's outstanding economic success in the post-war period. The Japanese management system and work ethic were supposedly products of Japanese cultural uniqueness.

That Nihonjinron had a mass audience was evident from the hundreds of books and articles written on the subject that were devoured by Japanese. Japanese firms who were expanding their presence overseas took up these ideas and propagated their own literature, both to explain themselves to foreign businessmen but also to instruct their employees on how they might improve their communications with non-Japanese.

Although Nihonjinron publications continued to appear in the 1990s, the peak of its popularity coincided with the peak of Japan's economic prosperity. The collapse of the economy in 1991 and its subsequent stagnation have cast doubt on the validity of the thesis of Japanese uniqueness for many Japanese. Although variations of the idea of a distinctive Japanese culture continued to be developed, recent scholarship re-evaluating Japan's relationships with Korea and China suggest yet another alternative in Japan's post-1868 quest for an identity that separates itself from a Eurocentric perspective. Whereas the Meiji period of nation-building saw Japanese scholars create a new field of "Oriental Studies" (Tōyōshi) that placed Japan at the pinnacle of Asian historical development, in the 1990s new scholarship openly acknowledged Japan's historical borrowings from ancient Korean states and analyzed premodern history in terms of Asian systems of economic and political exchange.

In a variety of ways, Japanese have become conscious of a pluralistic trend within their own country (see "Multiethnic Japan"). Pressure from human rights activists in the world community has forced the Japanese government to directly address grievances voiced by minority groups in Japan. The expanding cultural and economic interconnections of Japanese with the outside world, a process running through the entire twentieth century, reinforces the cosmopolitan trend. Finally, the spurt of in-migration since 1985 has persisted into the new century, and the presence of new non-Japanese minorities, not only as workers but also as brides of Japanese men, points to the challenge of creating a cultural identity for Japan that reflects the changing times.

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